

OBAMAS FAIL TO RSVP

A new TV series might showcase the first couple's lack of etiquette, p 28



BIDEN ROOTS FOR FLYERS

The vice president said if he doesn't, Jill makes him sleep alone, p 28

PAGE 26 WWW.THEHILL.COM

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Soles, souls and songs

The House's retiring shoe man did it all

By Jordy Yager

Nearly every day the House has convened during the past six years, Eddie Lee Carter has trekked to the Capitol from his Maryland home to shine lawmakers' shoes in the House's Speaker's Lounge.

But his last day as one of the House's most beloved figures came earlier this month, after the 77-year-old decided it had become too difficult to get to work. With two artificial knees — which require the use of a black metal cane to balance out the limp in his gait — high blood pressure and diabetes — for which he receives dialysis three days a week — Carter decided it was time to retire.

Lawmakers, however, did not allow him to leave quietly.

On Carter's last day, Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) took to the House floor to officially recognize him. Wilson has never even gotten his shoes shined, Carter said, but they share a homeland of sorts. Carter was born in Beech Island, S.C., where Wilson's grandfather was also born. Every year Wilson brings Carter a small pin with the U.S. flag and the South Carolina flag on it, and Carter proudly wears it on the lapel of his suit jacket.

At the close of Wilson's speech, as dozens of members rose to give their shoe man a standing ovation, Carter stood above them in the House gallery, blowing kisses as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"This was the happiest day of my life," Carter said afterward. Carter made a living in the House charging \$6 per shine,

but though he had been working on shoes since he was a teenager in Augusta, Ga., he is also a Methodist minister who at one time aspired to a singing career. His time in the House taught him a few things: Republicans are better tipplers than Democrats, treat members of both political parties equally; and pray for their souls.

"When I pray to God for this place, and when I work on their crafts from Republicans," Carter said, sitting down in the Speaker's Lobby while on a break. But any signs that he may be feeling old age were absent on his last day, as scores of members approached Carter, telling him, "We're going to miss you." One Republican lawmaker even handed Carter five \$20 bills as a "retirement bonus," Carter said. He stuck the \$100 in his left pants pocket so as not to mix it up with the change he would give customers from his right pocket.

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) told him that, in Rangel's 40 years on Capitol Hill, he's seen a staff member get recognized only once before.

Carter said his perch in the Speaker's Lounge also taught him a lot about how the House operates.

"What you hear on the floor and what you hear in the Speaker's Lounge might be two different things," said Carter, wearing a beige suit jacket, a black shirt, and a yellow, gray and black striped tie.

"I've heard conversations that I'll never speak of again, just be-

cause it's not my place," he said. "Nothing terrible, just things like [lawmakers asking other lawmakers] 'How do we vote?' And I'd wonder why he would ask another man how to vote. You ought to know what you're voting for."

Members rarely asked for Carter's opinion or advice on legislation, he said. But he did lend some words of encouragement to one member in particular: Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio).

Carter started to smoke as a teenager, but he stopped in 1973. His trick was to carry a cigarette in his lips but never light it. Outside of his window in the Speaker's Lounge, Carter would see the members of Congress who smoke pacing back and forth on the balcony. Boehner was one of them.

"One day while he was getting a shine, I said, 'Mr. Boehner, I'm praying for you [to stop] smoking.' He said, 'Mr. Reverend, it's hard,'" Carter re-

"WHEN I PRAY TO GOD FOR THIS PLACE, AND WHEN I WORK ON THEIR SHOES, I DON'T SEPARATE DEMOCRATS FROM REPUBLICANS."

Eddie Lee Carter House's retiring shoe man

called. "I said, 'Try not lighting it. That's how I stopped.'"

Boehner, for his part, said he was going to miss Carter, joking that he was losing a fellow Republican.

"He'd preach to you," said Boehner on his way out to the House balcony to smoke a cigar.



Eddie Lee Carter came to Washington as a singer and began working in a shoe shop to raise money. Eventually he opened his own store.

rette. "And he was a big Republican. He'd start espousing all of these Republican principles to anyone that was ever around. He was a really nice guy who really did a great job for the members, and he's somebody we'll miss." Carter saw a lot of shoes during his time on Capitol Hill, but he said Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr. (D-Ga.) has some of the best and is one of the sharpest-dressed members. Bishop once gave

Carter was also known to drive congressmen — like Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) when he was in the House — to their homes nearby on Capitol Hill to pick up large orders of shoes needing fixing. He estimated he's repaired the shoes of about 15 lawmakers.

Carter first came to Washington as a singer to make a solo record. He began working in a shoe shop to raise money. Eventually he opened up his own store — the first of three shoe shops he's owned —

and the dream of becoming a career vocalist faded, though he's sung at the Kennedy Center and in dozens of churches over the years.

Before he left at the end of his last day, Carter sat down outside the south entrance to the House floor and held his first impromptu concert in the Capitol to passers-by. Singing hymns like "Amazing Grace," the sound of Carter's voice echoed down to the Rotunda and mixed, fittingly, with the click-clack of the shoes of staff and lawmakers leaving for the day.

Carter a pair of old golf shoes that were peeling apart.

Days later Carter returned the shoes to Bishop, but the lawmaker didn't recognize them. Carter had covered them anew with white leather. Sanford said he golfs in them all the time now.